

'The freezers are full': Kindness of strangers saves pantry

By Lolly Bowean
Tribune staff reporter

On Tuesday afternoon Lo Quator Dinkins was inside her Hazel Crest food pantry explaining to a client that she didn't have meat and canned goods, but he could take all the bread and fresh produce he could eat.

She hadn't had the money to buy meat as usual the previous Friday, so all she had were items

TRIBUNE UPDATE

'It's been beautiful. People have come to my rescue.'

—Lo Quator Dinkins, who runs a Hazel Crest food pantry

she had received for free.

Just then, two men wearing blue T-shirts arrived in a brown van. They had heard Dinkins' story, and wanted to help. They



brought cases and cases of frozen ribs, hamburgers, steaks, sausage, perch and other food.

"We said, 'If we go out there, let's make sure it's worth it for

her,'" said one of the men. The driver, who would not give his name, said he picked up a Saturday Tribune to read the sports section and was miffed it was gone. Instead he read the news section and learned of Dinkins' struggle to keep her pantry open. He knew he could help.

Dinkins became emotional and just patted her heart. When the men finished unloading the food, she gave them both hugs.

And she turned to her client and handed him packages of beef short ribs, boxes of sausage and ground meat to go with his cabbage, onions, green beans and loaves of bread. He flashed a grin as wide as his face.

It's been this way since Saturday, when Dinkins was featured in a page one Tribune story and in a video on the paper's Web

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PANTRY: Utility bills paid, meat delivered

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site, she said. Strangers have arrived at her door, offering help and support. Many won't give their name, just their donation. Sometimes it's food, sometimes it's a check.

A Winnetka man came with his secretary and made arrangements to pay Dinkins' \$3,500 past-due electric bill, which had put her pantry in the dark. ComEd said a half-dozen people called to help her. On Tuesday when she reopened, the lights were on.

A Chicago Heights man, who also wished to remain anonymous, drove to her storefront and wrote a \$2,000 check. Dinkins said it was a miracle from God. The man said he doesn't believe in God, but he believes in good people.

"It's been beautiful," she said. "People have come to my rescue. I have to say thanks."

For more than 20 years, Dinkins has made it her mission to feed the hungry in the area by handing out bags of groceries from her small warehouse.

Her story was featured in the newspaper because she was on the brink of having to shut down. She was keeping her freezers going with a borrowed generator. She was also behind on her phone bill and rent, she said.

The pantry is unusual because she runs it herself with volunteers and doesn't have administrators to raise funds and make sure business affairs are in order.

On Saturday, the Winnetka man drove three hours in traffic to see the pantry for himself, Dinkins said. She showed him her folder of bills.

"He just started writing," she said. He paid the \$3,500 ComEd bill and said he would continue to do so for a year. He paid \$1,100 to get the phone bill current.

"He like to give me a heart attack, child," she said. "I was like a zombie, I was so shocked."

Strangers gave donations big and small to ensure she could

stay open.

"A gentleman told me, 'You will not close. We will make sure of it,'" she said. "It makes me feel like we haven't been forgotten."

When Helen Kearns of northwest suburban Palatine learned of Dinkins' mission, she said it touched her heart.

"She's genuine and sincere," Kearns said. "She would do this whether she had a lot of money or nothing."

Kearns said she couldn't help but want to make a contribution. She doesn't worry that Dinkins doesn't have the structure in place to keep her pantry on a solid financial footing. Now that people know about her, they'll make sure she's OK.

"She needs some help with the books to keep order, but she seems to be doing a good job without it," Kearns said. "She has a steady flow of people who need her, and something happens all the time to help her out."

Sadhu Singh, president of the Sikh Religious Society, said Dinkins may not be of the same faith, but she's in step with the group's mission to serve humanity. That's why his organization stepped up to help.

"This lady was doing a very good deed," he said. "We have to solve the problem of the poor in this land of prosperity. We will pay some rent for her. We'll do whatever we can so she can continue helping people."

When the donation of meat arrived, Melvin Brannon of Markham had just finished selecting a bag of produce. He said he came to the pantry because on Monday, his wife pointed out they didn't have any food to grill on the holiday. He couldn't stop smiling as Dinkins loaded chicken tenders, rib tips and sausage links into his cart.

"My wife's going to be real happy when I get home," he said. "I've got barbecue sauce, and now I've got the meat to go with it."

Dinkins could relate to his excitement. This is the first time she's seen such an outpouring, she said. Never before have the bills all been paid up, Dinkins said. Never before has the phone rung off the hook with people committing to help.

"Here's something we haven't heard around here," Bryon Lyons, a volunteer who was helping unload the meat, told Dinkins. "The freezers are full. We've got no more room."

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